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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/PPD, EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [OPRC](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: CHARGE CLEARS THE AIR ON ELECTION ASSISTANCE, MCA CRITERIA,  
ABSENCE OF AMBASSADOR AND OTHER ISSUES

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(U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

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SUMMARY  
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1. (SBU) On January 24, the Charge d'Affaires, accompanied by the MCC Armenia Country Director, held a press conference that received wide-spread coverage. During the press conference, the Charge focused on U.S. assistance programs, including the Millennium Challenge program and the Embassy's USD six million program to help Armenia hold free and fair elections. The Charge answered a broad range of questions on topics including whether falsified elections in 2007 could lead to the suspension of the MCC program, the U.S. stance on the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku Railroad, and the importance of having a U.S. ambassador in Armenia. Press coverage was extensive, with virtually all major television stations, newspapers, and news agencies covering the conference. Reports were largely factual and positive, with a few opposition newspapers criticizing the Charge for not being critical enough of the authorities. A transcript of the press conference is available on post's website, [www.usa.am](http://www.usa.am). End Summary.

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ELECTION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM  
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2.(U) Much of the press conference held at the Friday Club, a relatively new but well-known journalist club in Yerevan, focused on the Embassy's USD six million program to help Armenia hold free and fair elections. This program had been in the press recently when two pro-government newspapers claimed the program was a U.S. attempt at "interfering" in Armenia's "internal affairs." Most media outlets covered the Charge's comments positively, emphasizing the Charge's statement that, "We're working with the Police and with OVIR to improve the National Voter Registry. We're working with the Central Election Commission to train all territorial and precinct election committee members. ...One thing I'd like to point out is that it's not just the American government that is working to help Armenia succeed in its goal for free and fair elections. A variety of other organizations, including the Council of Europe, UNDP, OSCE, and another level of international NGOs are helping as well." Hayots Ashkhar, one of the newspapers that recently published a number of articles claiming the program was "interference," did not criticize the program this time. Its only comment on the election assistance program was its claim that at a press conference later in the day, the Central Election Commission Chairman said he was unaware of the program and that training of election officials was being carried out with funding from the GOAM budget.

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MCA FUNDING CONTINGENT ON ELECTIONS  
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13. (U) Much of the coverage also focused on the Millennium Challenge program in Armenia. Most media outlets reported on the Charge's statement that, "The MCC Board of Directors did express to the MCA-Armenia Governing Council that a serious deficiency in the upcoming elections would cause the MCC Board of Directors to review out of season the eligibility of Armenia. ...A sharp drop in performance in any one of the indicators can bring about a review of eligibility. But, we are confident, or I am optimistic, that that is not going to happen this year." Media outlets also widely covered the Charge's statement on the MCA that, "Yesterday evening, which was early this morning in Armenia, President Bush mentioned this great new program in his State of the Union address. And he called on the Congress to fully fund the program, which supports countries where democracy is on the rise and corruption is in retreat. This program, the compact of which was developed by the Government of Armenia, is to provide \$236 million for a five-year program of strategic investments in rural roads and irrigation infrastructure. But this program is contingent on Armenia demonstrating that it is keeping to the commitments of continued reform." 168 Hours, a pro-opposition newspaper, remarked that it found it understandable that the United States government is proud of the MCA program since any country would be proud of being able to tell another country what to do "at a cost of only 0.0 percent of its budget."

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U.S. AMBASSADOR IN ARMENIA WOULD RAISE LEVEL OF COOPERATION  
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14. (U) Press coverage also emphasized the Charge's answer to a question about why it is important that the United States has an ambassador in Armenia. In an article entitled, "We Agree to Hoagland," opposition newspaper Aravot quotes the Charge as saying, "The appointment of an American ambassador to the Republic of

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Armenia is very important for our bilateral relations. That decision is not being taken in Armenia. The Republic of Armenia has already agreed to the President's appointment. The President has made his appointment and it is now up to the United States Senate to provide its advice and consent as described in our Constitution. ...I'm very fortunate that I have close cooperation with colleagues from the Government of Armenia and with my colleagues in Washington as well. But I'm certain that the presence of an American ambassador would raise the level of this cooperation and would demonstrate the importance of the relationship between the United States and the Republic of Armenia to all Armenians and to Armenian-Americans in the United States."

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FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS?  
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15. (U) Journalists asked a number of questions related to the freeness and fairness of the May 2007 parliamentary elections. Novoye Vremya, a Russian-language pro-government newspaper, published an article entitled, "I Hope the Elections Will be Carried Out Without Violations." The article says, "Godfrey himself did not hide his optimism regarding Armenian-U.S. relations. He said, 'I am optimistic,' and this became the key statement in his press conference yesterday. This related basically to the upcoming elections, which, as hoped by the diplomat, will be carried out without violations." Haykakan Zhamanak, a sensationalist opposition daily, was critical of the Charge for not being tougher on Armenia's authorities. Regarding the Charge's answer to a question about whether the elections could already be considered not free since opposition figures did not have access to certain resources and were unable to gain access to television airtime, the newspaper comments, "In order to not answer the question directly, Godfrey pretended not to understand. 'This is an issue widely discussed during political debates in the United States as well,' Godfrey said. Won't you tell us, do the Republicans in the U.S. control all TV stations...and

constantly show their defense minister, and do the Democrats knock at the doors of TV stations in vain and ask for a small amount of air time?" (Note: After explaining that campaign finance issues are a hotly debated issue, including in the United States, the Charge addressed the issue of fair coverage by television stations. He said, "But again, if I can make an appeal to you, and especially to the broadcast journalists, to be equitable, be fair, make sure that your listeners, and your viewers, and your readers have an opportunity to hear from all the candidates." As we expected and as far as we are aware, no television station aired this appeal. End Note.)

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COMMENT  
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¶6. (U) This press conference allowed us to stress the importance of free and fair elections in 2007, describe the MCA-Armenia Program and the fact that it is contingent upon Armenia's performance in the indicator areas, and accurately explain our election assistance program. This was an opportune time to get our message out to the public, as elections are approaching and our election assistance program had recently received critical press coverage.

GODFREY